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SUBJECT: THIS WEEK IN ALBANIA, FEBRUARY 16-22, 2008)

11. (U) The following is a weekly report prepared by Embassy Tirana's local staff to provide political and economic context and insight into developments in Albania.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

12. (U) Love is in the Air: After weeks of bipartisan deliberation, the Albanian Parliament overwhelmingly passed this week the justice reform law, a key benchmark on the road to NATO membership. The Albanian justice system suffers from a low approval rating and these reforms are designed to both improve judicial performance and boost confidence in the system among the citizenry. New measures include: a pay raise for judges based on seniority; detailed regulations for dismissal of judges; and measures to improve court administration. At the beginning of the year, the opposition and ruling coalitions expressed their firm commitment to work together to pass reforms necessary for the country's integration into NATO, and it is hoped that the Allies will consider this measure to be progress toward that goal.

13. (U) Albanians Ecstatic Over Kosovo's Independence: Everything came to a halt last week when Kosovo declared independence. Thousands took to the streets in a spontaneous outpouring of joy or followed events on television from home or from bars and restaurants. Tirana's main boulevard was closed to traffic and lined with Albanian flags. Albanian journalists assigned to cover events in Pristina struggled to maintain an objective stance, sometimes becoming celebrators rather than reporters. The festive mood spread throughout the country with rallies in Vlore, Shkoder, Elbasan and Korce. The prevailing feeling was of a historic moment, something citizens never expected to materialize in their lifetime, and a general sense of relief that Kosovars would now have a chance to decide their own future. Albanian novelist Ismail Kadare best captured the mood when he said, "Anything we say is pale. The tongue sometimes has not been trained for such rare events."

14. (U) Albanian authorities and politicians maintained a low profile throughout the weekend. With no government sponsored events, Prime Minister Berisha called for dignified celebration in a televised address from his office. Albanian MPs and ministers gathered in Parliament to follow events as they unfolded. All had agreed to stay in Tirana, and Berisha responded to inquiries with this: "You have rightly asked why official Tirana is not in Pristina. Every Albanian would agree that this could not be a celebration between Kosovo and Albania," but instead a celebration for Kosovo on its own, with its friends and allies in support.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

¶5. (U) Kosovo-Albania Trade Relations: Kosovo is already an important regional trade partner for Albania. A Free Trade Agreement that entered into force in October 2003 has significantly enhanced cross-border trade in a wide range of products in a positive, upward trend. In 2007, exports to Kosovo amounted in \$51 million and imports were \$23 million, both almost double that of ¶2006. Kosovo is the destination of almost half of Albania's regional exports, including agricultural products, metals and minerals.

¶6. (U) Kosovo is the only country with which Albania enjoys a positive trade balance. Although inadequate infrastructure keeps the two from realizing their bilateral potential, the completion of the Durres-Kukes road is expected to open a new chapter in economic ties and increase opportunities, better integrating the two markets.

Quote of the Week

¶7. (U) Excerpts from Prime Minister Berisha's remarks to a group of young Democratic Party members on February 16: "The Kosovars spilled rivers of blood so Albania could become independent. Now that Kosovo will become independent, a history of colonial rule comes to an end, and a new chapter of peace, stability and integration opens up. An opportunity for a new chapter in Serb-Albanian relations also opens up, which in spite of their burdened past can now focus on the future."

THIS WEEK IN ALBANIAN CULTURE

¶8. (U) It is Not What you Wear, But How You Wear It!: As you walk down the streets of "The Block," the most fashionable section of

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Tirana, you begin to wonder whether you are in a developing country after all. Expensive cars and stylish clothes are misleading at first - upon closer inspection they are not so much expensive as flamboyant. While fashion trends follow Western styles, their adaptation in the country can be interesting. Professional European women usually lean toward casual and practical elegance, but Albanian females seem to have lost sight of practicality, often sighted in stiletto heels across the rugged cobblestones of Skanderbeg Square or along the distressed and potholed sidewalks of their city. For the average young woman, mainstream fashion is of the Hollywood nightclub category, while young men choose jeans (an average of one size too small) with a tight t-shirt.

¶9. (U) However, in the smaller cities of the countryside there is an interesting mix of old traditional dress as well as the latest styles. This is usually due to generational gaps, where the older generation hangs on to tradition while the younger one westernizes as much as possible (within their usually strict budgetary limits). Dressing well is perceived as a sign of wealth, contrasting with communist times when most people had only a few outfits made to last for several years. Now many people spend a good deal of money on clothes in their attempts to pursue a Western lifestyle.

WITHERS